

For Immediate Release  
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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) calls on parties to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in Sudan to abide by the ruling issued Wednesday (July 22, 2009) by the Abyei Arbitration Tribunal at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. The decision settles the Abyei boundaries dispute, which is central to achieving peace in Sudan. Immediately following the announcement, the National Congress Party (NCP), which dominates the North, and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), which governs Southern Sudan, pledged their commitment to the ruling.

"It is imperative that the NCP and the SPLM fully support and implement the ruling, as they have promised," said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. "It is a cornerstone of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement whose implementation is crucial for building a just and lasting peace in Sudan. Failure of the CPA could reignite a conflict in which millions of innocent people have been victimized because of their religious affiliations and ethnic identities."

"The parties honoring their agreement and accepting the Tribunal's ruling would be both a victory for the rule of law in Sudan and an important precedent for resolving other conflicts among the region's diverse religious and ethnic groups in a fair, open, and peaceful manner," said Mr. Leo.

In 2007, the Government of Sudan, led by Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, rejected a report by the Abyei Boundaries Commission (ABC) to determine the border, despite the CPA stating that the decision of the ABC was to be "final and binding." In rejecting the report, which found that Abyei lies in Southern Sudan, President al-Bashir charged the ABC experts with

“exceeding their mandate.” In 2008, the NCP and the SPLM agreed that the settlement of President al-Bahir’s charge and the Abyei boundaries would be addressed by the Tribunal at the Permanent Court of Arbitration. The Tribunal’s ruling found that the ABC did exceed its mandate in some areas of its report and redefined the boundaries.

The accusation by President al-Bashir and the NCP was just one of many instances since the CPA was signed in 2005 that the North has delayed implementing the agreement’s provisions. These delaying tactics have established a dangerous precedent that one of the parties to the CPA can, with impunity, unilaterally refuse to implement its provisions. That past action, as well as others, has caused tensions which have threatened to reignite civil war.

“Further delaying tactics or failure to implement the remaining CPA provisions, including the elections scheduled for 2010 and the 2011 referendum, are unacceptable” said Mr. Leo. “Sudan must be held accountable to its CPA commitments. The CPA contains specific protections for religious freedom for all Sudanese. If religious freedom is going to be protected and respected in Sudan, the country’s leaders, both Northerners and Southerners, must demonstrate their commitment to international law by accepting and implementing the Tribunal’s ruling.”

USCIRF welcomes the engagement of United States Special Envoy to Sudan Gen. J. Scott Gration, who is currently in Sudan, and calls on him to continue to work with members of the SPLM and the NCP to ensure that the decision is fully implemented. Efforts now underway by Gration, Sudanese parties, and the international community to prevent violence, educate the communities on the ruling, and plan for full implementation must be continued and sustained.

The Abyei region, with its history as a crossroads between North and South, was one of the more contested points in the protracted negotiations leading to the CPA. Abyei has been particularly problematic because it, not only is home to a volatile mix of rival ethnic groups with ties to the North and South, but also provided a disproportionate number of fighters for the Southern-dominated Sudan People’s Liberation Army. In May 2008, units of the Northern-controlled Sudan Armed Forces and associated tribal militia brutally attacked local residents and destroyed private property, laying waste to the region’s main town, also called Abyei, and driving 90,000 civilians from their homes. The deposits of oil in the region, and the economic competition they engendered, have exacerbated the dispute.

The CPA, signed in 2005, ended a North-South civil war that killed more than two million people and drove more than four million from their homes. Most of the victims in the 22-year war were Christians, followers of traditional African religions, or Muslims disfavored by those in power in Khartoum. Because of the egregious and systematic violations of freedom of religion or belief committed by the government of Sudan, USCIRF continues to recommend that Sudan be named a “Country of Particular Concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. The State Department has so designated Sudan annually since 1999.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF’s principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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